

Introductions for Students of New Testament Literature (ISNTL 2)

The Pharisees

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The depiction of the Pharisees in the New Testament is not, for the most part, a positive one. Unfortunately, this has caused many Christians to view the Pharisees solely as the evil antagonists who plotted Jesus' death. In fact, the centuries-old, narrow prejudice has influenced the manner in which 'Pharisee' has been defined in our modern English dictionaries. For example, opening up the renowned *Oxford English Dictionary* (subtitled, the definitive record of the English language) provides the two following definitions: “*n.* A person of the spirit or character commonly attributed to the Pharisees in the New Testament; a legalist or formalist; a self-righteous person, a hypocrite”¹ and “*v.* to take credit to oneself for piety.” Commonly, it is the picture of a legalistic-hypocrite that we find behind modern conversations regarding Pharisees. During sermons, the Pharisees are often maligned as legalistic, pious holy rollers to whom Jesus was diametrically opposed. Without detailing the manner in which the Pharisees have been used to propagate Anti-Semitism throughout history,² the normal undergrad student will readily refer to the Pharisee as a legalistic-hypocrite. This identification is then applied (since the church fathers) to all of the Jewish people, especially those that are Torah-observant (i.e. observe the law). Christian orthodoxy (i.e. right teaching) should do all it can to fight against sweeping generalizations and prejudicial depictions that have plagued church history, and cloud both ancient and modern realities. For this all-to-brief introduction will we deal with who the Pharisees were in antiquity, specifically during the Second Temple Period and, in particular, during the time of Jesus.

There is some indication in the New Testament, though scarce, that Jesus' circle, apart from the disciples, actually consisted of Pharisees. In Luke 14:1 Jesus has a Sabbath night's dinner with one the Pharisees. And on other occasions, the Pharisees are concerned with his welfare as well as those of the early disciples. Shortly before the account of Jesus' dinner, the Pharisees are depicted as warning him regarding Herod's desire to kill him (Lk 13:31). In the book of Acts, Gamaliel the Pharisee, a teacher of the Law and man held in honor by all people (νομοδιδάσκαλος τίμιος παντὶ τῷ λαῷ; perhaps even Paul's teacher), stands amidst the council and argues in favor of the disciples being released (5:33-39). We should also note that during the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) there are Pharisees who were part of the nascent Christian community. It appears that joining the newly-formed community did not erase one's Pharisaic affiliation. In fact, it appears that the Jewish members of the nascent community continued to be Torah observant, and this included its leadership (see Acts 15, 21).

The Pharisees as a group probably started sometime in the 2nd century B.C.E., either before or during the Hasmonean revolt (about 150 years before the birth of Jesus). The first time they are

¹It should be noted that there is a second definition pertaining to the Pharisees: A member of a religious party within Judaism between the 2nd cent. B.C. and New Testament times, distinguished by its rigorous interpretation and observance of the written Mosaic Law as well as the traditions of the elders

²Robert Michael, *Holy Hatred: Christianity, Anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust* (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2006), esp. 23, 40, 135.

mentioned is during the reign of Queen Salome (Shelomtzion) Alexandra (139-67 B.C.E.; Jos. *J.W.* 1:110). The name ‘Pharisee’ likely comes from the Hebrew *p-r-sh* (as a noun *perush/perushim*) which means ‘to separate oneself’ or ‘to explain’ or ‘make clear’. We might say that the Pharisees were a group who were concerned primarily with the proper interpretation of the Bible and separated themselves from the things that God had told them to separate from (which are listed in the Torah [the first 5 books of the Bible]). Discussions about how one should live out the Jewish law can be seen throughout the Gospels. Therefore, we should not think of all Jesus’ debates with the Pharisees as ‘arguments’ in the same way that our modern minds understand arguments or fights. Debates among the rabbis about the way believers should live out the Torah/Law is a common feature of ancient, as well as modern, Judaism. They are not intended to cause division but to determine the way God desires his faithful to live; think Prov. 27:17: “Iron sharpens Iron.”

After the destruction of the Temple, it is primarily the Pharisaic group that is credited with carrying on the Jewish traditions that we have preserved in the literature of the Sages/Rabbis. While we cannot always draw a straight line of development from the Pharisees to the Rabbis, there are traditions and interpretations preserved there that speak to the time of Jesus, and ones which indicate that Jesus himself was, at times, in agreement with Pharisaic thought. Thus we have Jesus’ often forgotten statement regarding the Pharisee’s: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; *so practice and observe whatever they tell you*, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice.” The problem here is not teaching but practice; their teaching is correct! This, of course, should be qualified with the Gospel’s criticism of the Pharisees. Such criticism, however, should not be seen as one that encompasses all Pharisee’s, or even worse, all Torah-observant Jewish people.

Yet, another issue, which pertains to this discussion and is quite complex, is the manner in which Jesus interprets Scripture—a method, which can be deemed rabbinic, if not even, Pharisaic. This is not to say that Jesus was himself a Pharisee, as Paul was and continued to be (Acts 23:6-9), but he seems to be religiously, culturally, and philosophically closest to the Pharisaic group.³ Moreover, the Sadducees (sp. the priesthood) seem to be the intended group of Jesus’ greatest criticism,⁴ who were also criticized by the rabbis (*t. menah* 13:21; *b. Pesah* 57a).

While this introduction does not do justice to who the Pharisees of history were,⁵ it is intended to give students of the New Testament a historically fair depiction without entering into the complexities which form historical inquiry. Hopefully, it will serve to spark questions regarding the relationship(s) between Jesus and his contemporaries, specifically the Pharisees.

³Most students are aware of the different groups that existed during the time of Jesus (e.g. Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes), it is also true, but not always thought, that these groups would have had internal differences. For a modern example, think of the amount different churches that come out of one denomination.

⁴E.G. The Cleansing of the Temple, Matt 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; Parable of the Wicked Tenants Matt 21:33-45; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19.

⁵Of which books have been written, E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Beliefs and Concepts* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979); D. Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity* (Jerusalem: MOD Books, 1996); B. Young, *Paul the Jewish Theologian: A Pharisee among Christians, Jews, and Gentiles* (Hendrickson, 1997).

